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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

8 February 1954

DRAFT MEMORANDUM FOR THE D/CI (For Board Consideration)

SUBJECT: Current Situation in Indochina

CONCLUSIONS

1. From a strictly military viewpoint, Viet Minh successes in Indochina over the past several weeks have not appreciably altered the situation and the war remains essentially a stalemate. From a political and psychological viewpoint, however, the well-publicized Viet Minh operations have probably diminished somewhat the will of the French and Indochinese to continue the struggle.

2. Viet Minh successes over the past weeks have consisted almost solely of thrusts into lightly-held areas of minor military importance and forays by irregular troops into areas under Vietnamese control. Viet Minh forces have not during this period defeated any French Union units of major size, and they have avoided engaging French Union forces whenever possible. The purpose of these operations, conducted simultaneously

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over an extensive area, has almost certainly been to obtain at cheap cost a psychological and propaganda advantage.

3. French Union forces have thus far displayed considerable defensive mobility but also a remarkable lack of offensive initiative and aggressiveness in countering Viet Minh moves. This lack of aggressiveness has done much to increase the psychological impact of these moves both in Indochina and in France.

4. The combination of Viet Minh psychological victories and continued French defensive-mindedness throughout the current fighting season has brought the Indochina situation one step nearer crisis. In order to check the growing defeatist trend in France and Indochina, the French must achieve major military victories during the present season. Furthermore, they must continue to have such victories in order to provide a psychological climate essential to the success of their long-range program embodied in the Navarre Plan.

5. The outlook for Indochina is not bright for either the short-term or the long-term. Although it is probable that the French will carry out the offensive operations along the southeast coast planned for this year, we doubt that the French can achieve sufficient military

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success during the remainder of this fighting season to check the trend toward defeatism. We therefore anticipate that by the end of this season (May or June) pressures in France for some relief from the burdens of the war will become irresistible.

6. Over the longer term, we consider it unlikely that the French have sufficient stamina to see their long-range program through to success. We therefore believe that the French will eventually feel obliged to turn to the US and its allies for direct help in conducting the war.

#### DISCUSSION

7. During the past several weeks, Viet Minh forces in Indochina have conducted a series of successful operations. These include: (a) a thrust across the waist of Indochina and subsequent harassing operations in the Thakhek-Savannakhet region of Laos; (b) the encirclement of Dien Bien Phu, a French strongpoint near the northeastern border of Laos, and a subsequent thrust southward toward the Laotian capital, Luang Prabang; and (c) widespread harassing operations throughout Vietnam.

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8. With the exception of the encirclement at Dien Bien Phu, these operations took place in areas which were lightly-held by French Union forces. The Viet Minh have at no time defeated French Union units of major size, and they have avoided engaging French Union forces whenever possible. It is particularly noteworthy that after massing troops at Dien Bien Phu at greater than 2 to 1 superiority and apparently making extensive preparations for an assault, the Viet Minh finally elected to contain and by-pass the French strongpoint and thrust into lightly-defended areas in Laos.

9. The French Union forces have demonstrated considerable defensive ability in countering these Viet Minh moves. Exploiting their airborne and air-lift capability, the French were able to checkmate the Viet Minh thrust at Savannakhet with mobile and parachute units, and they were similarly able to mass a formidable defensive force at Dien Bien Phu. They almost certainly have the capability to make a similar defense at Luang Prabang. However, they have also displayed a remarkable lack of initiative and aggressiveness and have thrown away chances to deal crushing blows to Viet Minh forces. Vietnamese irregular forces have in several instances demonstrated an unwillingness to stand and fight.

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10. This series of Viet Minh offensive thrusts and French Union countermoves has once again made it obvious that the French do not have the over-all initiative in the Indochina war. The Viet Minh tactics have effectively dispersed French Union forces throughout much of Indochina and forced them to assume static defensive roles. They have not, however, appreciably altered the balance of military power in Indochina, and the war remains essentially a stalemate. The Viet Minh and French Union forces opposed in the Tonkin Delta, the strategic center of the Indochina war, remain substantially in balance. Moreover, the French have launched offensive operations in the southeastern coastal regions as called for by the Navarre Plan and have achieved an initial success. The defensive mobility of the French enables them to reinforce their Delta defenses if necessary and thereby nullify Viet Minh drives in that vital region.

11. It is clear, however, that these Viet Minh operations have primarily had psychological and political -- not military -- objectives. The Viet Minh have tried, in conducting this series of thrusts over an extensive area, to obtain at cheap cost a psychological and propaganda advantage over the French and Indochinese. They have almost certainly succeeded in doing this, at least for the short term, and have probably already affected French and Indochinese determination to continue the struggle.

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12. In broader terms, the combination of Viet Minh psychological victories and continued French defensive-mindedness throughout the current fighting season has brought the Indochina situation one step nearer crisis. The burden of victory is on the French. They must achieve major military victories in Indochina during the present fighting season in order to check the defeatist trend in France and Indochina. Furthermore, they must continue to have considerable military successes in future seasons in order to create the psychological climate essential to the success of the Navarre long-range program of establishing a native Indochinese force capable of assuming a major role in winning the war. Although this plan calls for reaching this goal by Spring 1955, we consider that under present French direction it will take considerably longer, probably another year. To a considerable extent, the future of the war depends on whether the French and Indochinese have enough stamina to resist defeatist pressures and see their long-range program through over this long a period. Meanwhile, from the Communist viewpoint, prospects for eventual victory are good if they do no more than maintain the military stalemate.

13. Simultaneously with the growth of defeatist pressures in Indochina and at home, the increasing significance of the Indochina war has placed France under additional pressures. With the Korean armistice in effect,

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Indochina has become the major point of armed conflict between the East and the West. To some extent, this has been reflected in increased Chinese Communist involvement in the war, as evidenced by greater amounts of modern materiel going to the Viet Minh, increased numbers of Chinese personnel in rear area supply services and in training and advisory capacities, and a larger role in doctrinal direction of the Viet Minh. It has also been reflected in increased Communist emphasis, both in their propaganda and at the Big Four meeting, upon the possibilities of a negotiated settlement in Indochina, particularly in connection with some general Far Eastern settlement. These developments have sharpened the French dilemma.

14. The outlook for Indochina is not bright for either the short-term or the long-term. Given the present balance of forces and present Viet Minh tactics, it is not likely during the present fighting season that the French can break the present stalemate or achieve major military victories. We believe therefore that present trends in France and Indochina toward defeatism will continue and that by the end of the current fighting season, in May or June, the pressure in France for some relief from the burdens of the war will become irresistible. In this crisis, it is possible that the French will declare that the only alternative to direct negotiation with the Communists is allied troop support.

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15. For the long-term, it is not likely that the French, even assuming that they can check current trends toward defeatism, have enough stamina left to persevere for the period of time required to achieve success. We therefore believe that the French will eventually feel obliged to turn to the US and its allies for direct help in conducting the war.

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